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ABSTRACT

Reviewed in this address are research findings demonstrating that while some diversity in families is normal and functional, other forms of family diversity result from problems and are associated with human suffering. It is argued that both developmental and clinical studies have established the general rule that the father's positive presence in the home is, in the vast majority of cases, normally essential for the existence of family strength and child adjustment. Asserting that divorce has become one of the most common tragic crises in present day American society, and that victimless divorce is either rare or nonexistent when children are involved, the discussion further argues that an alternative to divorce or staying unhappily married exists: making major and prolonged efforts to solve marital problems and restore marital harmony. Discussion subsequently focuses on research which identifies the characteristics of fathers who promote normal child adjustment, parallel research on the characteristics of strong families, necessary conditions of normal child adjustment, public policy and the prevention of child suffering and family distress, restoring the primary parental role, applying research knowledge on family strengths, and national leadership on behalf of America's families. (RH)

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THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FATHER'S ROLE FOR CHILD ADJUSTMENT AND FAMILY STRENGTH[1]

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The Need to Restore Fathering for Family Well-Being

I want to express my appreciation to you, Mr. Chairman, and to the members of the House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families for inviting me to address this hearing. In my recent book Family Building, J. Allan Petersen contributed a chapter in which he asserted, "The family as an institution is here to stay. We are not deciding its existence. We may decide the quality of its life, its performance, its legal status but not its reality as a abiding institution. The human race will be perpetuated through the family.... Identifying family strengths and focusing on their improvement on a large scale is therefore a most significant undertaking with far-reaching consequences. Our zeroing in on the positive qualities of family strength has great potential and can provide clear guidance as to where to give attention and initiate action" (Petersen, 1985). Eighty-eight percent of all Americans live in families and fifty percent of all families have children under the age of 18 years (Chapman, 1985). For these reasons I commend your committee for addressing the strategic issues involved on the topic "The Diversity and Strength of American Families."

This is an important undertaking, to study the trends and changes in family life in America today. This committee has received testimony that has established the fact that single-parent families are forming at twenty times the rate of two-parent families. A record number of 1.2 million divorces in 1981 affected 1.8 million children. The divorce rate has more than doubled since 1970. But in addition, recent years have witnessed a notable increase in one-parent families in cases in which children live with a mother who has never been

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married. Since 1970, there has been a four-fold increase, to 2.8 million, in the number of children being raised by mothers who have never been married. These statistics, then, point to a major source of the new diversity existing in American families today as compared to previous generations--namely, the rapid increase in the total percentage of children living in father-absent homes.

I would therefore like to review my own research and other child development and family social science research on the father's role in family well being. I address this task not only as a research psychologist who has received over half a million dollars in federal research grants from the National Institute of Mental Health and other agencies, but also as a practicing clinical psychologist and professor at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine. My day-to-day work in the University's teaching hospitals constantly reminds me that there are some forms of diversity among people which are desirable but other forms of diversity which reflect genuine abnormality and create hardship and suffering. I often recall a telephone call that I received from the elementary school principal of one of my child patients. The principal told me, "Chad's teacher sent him to my office because he was crying uncontrollably in the classroom. After I had calmed him down and asked him, what is the matter, he told me, 'I don't know who my real daddy is.'"

The Diversity, Strengths and Weaknesses of American Families

To merely study the trends and demographics of family change does not, in itself, provide the full context necessary to understand normative family functioning or desired family functioning. For example, if a fifty-one percent majority of all fathers sexually abuse their daughters, this majority phenomena would not automatically be considered by our society to be desirable. It is imperative, therefore, that your committee differentiate diversity which arises out of family strengths from family diversity which arises out of weaknesses, problems and human failure. I will review a substantial body of empirical research that demonstrates that some types of families are inherently better environments for children's well-being.

Some Family Diversity is Within the Normal, Functioning Range

To draw the analogy to physical health, we all know healthy people with a diversity of physical characteristics: there are short people, tall people, black people, white people, blue-eyed people, brown-eyed people and so forth. These are all fine variations which can exist in a healthy person. And so it is, there is a range of types of families within the normal functioning range which includes some families, for example, with a dozen biological children, others with two adopted children, and still other married couples with no children. Some families live near or with extended family relatives and some families live as a nuclear family by itself. Some types of normal family diversity are built upon particular sets of strengths that a family may possess (Rekers, 1985a).

Other Forms of Family Diversity Result from Problems and Are Associated with Human Suffering

Extending our analogy to health, some people must unfortunately live out their life with one part of their body chronically impaired or missing--an arm or a leg or an eye, etc. Such an individual has a physical handicap and perhaps through crutches for the person without a leg or by learning to use hearing more effectively for the blind person, the body can compensate for the loss of one of its normal members.

And so it is with the family. Some forms of diversity are not necessarily desirable, for example, families with a physically abusive father, families who have lost a member through illness and death, families in which a father regularly gambles away his paycheck rather than providing support to the family, families in which children are neglected, or families in which drug abuse is chronic.

In a recent review of the cross-cultural research literature on parental accessibility by a Harvard professor, this conclusion was made: "Parents in this country (U.S.) spend less time with their children than in any other nation in the world, perhaps with the exception of England--the one country that surpasses the U.S. in violent crime and juvenile delinquency. Cross-cultural studies show that even in countries where children are brought up in collectives, parents tend to spend more time with their children than they do in this country. Research shows that, in Russia, fathers spend as much as two or three hours a day with their children. But, in this country, according to a study out of Boston, fathers spend on the average about 37 seconds a day with their young children" (Nicholi, 1985a).

Wide-spread parental inaccessibility and father absence in the U.S. is related to trends over the past 30 years in child-rearing practices, divorce, and out-of-wedlock birth rates. According to data from the National Center Health Statistics, between 1960 and 1980, out-of-wedlock birth rates rose from two to ten percent among whites and from twenty-two to fifty-five percent among blacks.

In 1960, one in eleven children in the United States lived in a single-parent home and by 1980, one in five children were living in a single-parent home. Dr. Paul Glick (1981) of the United States Bureau of the Census estimates that by 1990, one in four children will be living in a single-parent home, and that one in two--fully fifty percent of all children under age 18 in 1990--will have lived for some portion of their lives in a one-parent family. Ninety percent of these children live with their mother, with their father absent from the home. In 1980, there were over 11 million children living in families with a father-figure in the home.

These facts should be of great national concern, because both developmental and clinical studies have well-established the general rule that the father's positive presence in the home is, in the vast

majority of cases, normally essential for existence of family strength and child adjustment.

Characteristics of the Father's Role Are Essential For Family Strength

Major child adjustment problems are associated with father absence or failures in fathering. With this huge exodus of so many fathers from the homes of American children over the past two decades, we should surely ask: "What is the effect of the father's absence on children's development?" Research has documented that children without fathers more often have lowered academic performance, more cognitive and intellectual deficits, increased adjustment problems, and higher risks for psychosexual development problems (Bach, 1946; Biller, 1976; Biller & Baum, 1971; Carlsmith, 1964; Drake & McDugall, 1977; Hetherington & Deur, 1971; Lynn, 1974, 1976; Matthews, 1976; McCord, McCord & Thurber, 1962; Mead & Rekers, 1979; Nash, 1965; Nicholi, 1985b; Reis & Gold, 1977; Rekers, 1981, 1986; Stolz, 1954). With major research grants from the National Institute of Mental Health for many years, I have studied psychosexual and gender disturbances in children beginning in 1972-1973 when I served as a Visiting Scholar at Harvard University. I have found concluded that the father's absence is related to important risks for the boy's adjustments to a normal male identification (Rekers, 1978, 1985b, 1986; Rekers, Bentler, Rosen & Lovaas, 1977; Rekers & Jurich, 1983; Rekers & Mead, 1980; Rekers, Mead, Rosen & Brigham, 1983; Rekers, Rosen, Lovaass & Bentler, 1978).

Family studies research has isolated three major functions for an independently sustaining family unit with children--these are (1) income production, (2) household maintenance, and (3) child rearing. In the normal, intact family, these three functions are shared in a division of labor between the mother and the father.

When there is only one parent in the home instead of two, then one or more of these three vital functions usually suffers serious loss unless there is massive outside social and/or economic support provided. Consequently, it is all too common that the children suffer economic, social and/or emotional deprivation. It is not surprizing, in this context, that poor academic performance, susceptibility to peer groups, involvement in delinquent behavior, suicide, and homocide are all found to be higher among children from homes in which one or both parents are missing or frequently absent (Hoffman, 1961; Nicholi, 1985a, 1985b).

Research has established that one of the more important functions that the father normally fulfills in the family is to ensure the development of appropriate sexual identity in his children (Biller, 1976; Drake & McDougall, 1977; Greenstein, 1966; Hetherington, 1966; Lynn, 1976). The absence of the father for boys has been linked to greater occurrences of effeminancy, higher dependence, less successful adult heterosexual adjustment, greater aggressiveness or exaggerated masculine behaviors (Apperson & McAdoo, 1968; Bene, 1965; Berg & Kelly, 1979; Bieber, 1962; Earls, 1976; Evans, 1969; Greenstein, 1966; Mussen & Distler, 1960; Santrock, 1977; Stoller, 1969; West, 1959; Winch, 1949). All these detrimental effects reflect various reactions

to an inadequate development of masculine role and male identification.

In girls, research studies by Heatherington and her colleagues have compared girls with two parents with girls who grew up without a father because of divorce or death of the father. Compared with girls with intact nuclear families, girls who lost their father by death were more inhibited in their relationships with males in general, but girls who lost their fathers by divorce were overly responsive to males, were more likely to be sexually involved with males in adolescence, married younger, were pregnant more often before marriage, and became divorced or separated from their eventual husbands more frequently (Hetherington, 1972; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1976, 1978, 1979).

According to Cynthia Longfellow (1979) there are two crucial effects of father absence that need to be assessed in over 90% of the cases in which the father leaves: (1) the lack of parental supervision and discipline; (2) the lack of a sex-role model for the sons. A number of research studies have found that single parents (usually mothers) are at risk to develop poor quality relationships with their children which can then lead to increased psychopathology among the children (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1975; Hetherington, 1972; Hetherington, Cox and Cox, 1976). Both unsatisfactory parent-child and parent-parent relationships are individual risk factors for psychiatric effects upon the children (see review by Larson, 1985).

Are the Effects of Divorce Positive or Negative for Children?

In a review of effects of divorce on children, Wallerstein and Kelly (1979), the investigators of the "Children of Divorce Project" of the Marin Community Mental Health Center in California concluded:

> Initially, almost all children and many adolescents experience divorce as painful and as disruptive of their lives, and their suffering is compounded by both unrealistic and realistic fears. These fears are related to the following factors: a heightened sense of vulnerability, sadness at the loss of the protected structure of the family and of the parent who does not retain custody, guilt over fantasized or actual misdeeds that may have contributed to parents' quarrels (although such fantasies are not found in all children), worry over distressed parents, anger at the parent or parents who have disrupted the child's world, shame regarding parents' behavior, a sense of being alone, and concern about being different from peers. For many children and adolescents, the overall initial response to divorce can properly be considered a reactive depression. There is no evidence that these initial reactions are muted or are experienced as less painful because of the high incidence of divorce taking place in the surrounding community.

Nevertheless, there have been statements in the professional literature, surprisingly, to the contrary. For instance, Michael Lamb

(1977) concluded: "There is little support for the (assumption) that divorce is necessarily harmful....(p. 163)." Although he concluded that children of divorced parents are "at risk" for psychological damage, he also offered the opinion: "Divorce can be beneficial to children, inasmuch as it signals the termination of hostilities, uncertainties, and harmful hatefulness" (p. 171). Similarly, Phyllis McGrab (1978) acknowledged the sense of loss, the sense of failure, and the difficult transitions often associated with divorce for the child. But she also speculated, "When we consider the effect of divorce or separation on children, we must equally consider the effects of living in a home where there may be ongoing tension, conflict and stress. 'For the sake of the child' regardless of the short and long-term consequences, divorce or separation at times is the most viable solution to optimizing the potential of that child for sound emotional and personal growth." (p. 233).

Too often, in the professional literature, a supposed beneficial effect of divorce is presumed by making just this type of comparison: Compared to the conflict in a poor marriage, wouldn't the child be better off, after all, if the parents divorced? What is often omitted from the discussion is any potential for a third alternative for both the parents and the child: Namely, could the problems of the marriage be solved or resolved with some kind of help thereby eliminating the conflict and stress for the child. We must keep this third alternative in mind and not fatalistically assume that the divorce rate will continue at the present or higher rates, and that therefore somehow we must conclude that divorce is the best way out for many children. Too often, there is the assumption that nothing could be done to help solve the problem causing the conflict in the marriage.

A Shift in Social Attitudes Toward Divorce

Prior to the second half of the 20th century in America, divorce was not prevalent, and a popular attitude of even unhappily married couples was that they should stay together for the good of their children. In contrast, the latter half of the 20th century has witnessed a major shift in values to a popular lay and professional attitude expressing a strong sentiment that unhappy marriage for the couple is equally unhappy for the children, implying the needed so-called"solution" of divorce to restore happiness for the parents, which presumably will foster happiness for the children as well.

Although the myth of romantic love in marriage may be dying, the myth of romantic divorce flourishes for many Americans. While most might agree that perpetuating a conflict-filled marriage for the sake of the children only lacks complete logic, I am increasingly disappointed by so many in the media, as well as professionals and married couples alike who overlook the obvious third alternative to divorce or staying unhappily married. That is, it would be better to make major and prolonged efforts to solve the marital problems and restore harmony in the existing marriage, before considering the extreme alternative of divorce.

The Third Alternative--Strengthening Marriage and Family Relationships

It is irresponsible to automatically assume the fatalistic view that nothing could be done to solve the problems causing conflict in the marriage. With the widespread acceptance of divorce as an instant so-called "solution" in our instant society where we are used to instant meals and the like, millions of divorce cases entering the courts in the last decade have never attempted concerted problem solving efforts with an outside resource, such as a marriage counselor, psychologist, psychiatrist, clergy, social worker, or family life educator.

Furthermore, the followup studies on divorced children of Drs. Wallerstein and Kelly (1974, 1975, 1979) reveal that the majority (56%) of children surveyed five years after their parents' divorce did not consider their after-divorce families to be an improvement over their before-divorce home. The children reported more happiness before divorce that did their parents. The children generally prefer living with both mom and dad, even in the presence of considerable conflict. From the child's perspective, divorce should be viewed as an extreme measure of last resort, something akin to the amputation of a limb if one's body is affected by gangrene and no medical treatment has succeeded, but only after trying all possible types of medical treatment.

While neither an unhappy marriage nor a divorce is the most desirable environment for children's development, too many professionals and lay people alike hastily assume the inevitability of continued unhappiness in the conflicted marriage to ethically justify the supposed solution of family divorce.

Actually, divorce is typically little more than trading one set of problems for a different set of tragic and often enduring problems, often including the problems associated with father absence. It seems that millions of parents have purchased their own relief from marital conflict with a divorce that forces their children to pay the price in unhappiness, stress, and adjustment problems that could persist for a lifetime.

Victimless divorce is either rare or nonexistent when children are present (Bane, 1979; Hetherington, 1972; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1978; Kelly & Berg, 1978; Reinhard, 1977). How much better it would be if the professions and the public alike refocused upon a search for a genuine solution to marital dissatisfaction in order to preserve the family unit in an unbroken state. Vast numbers of marriages could be strengthened and problem-solving methods are available to reduce marital conflict and distress.

Divorce has become one of the most common tragic crises in present day American society. The rapid growth of the number of broken homes has forced unprecedented numbers of children to suffer as innocent victims.

The primary cause of father absence in American families today is divorce. Research on the effects of divorce reveals that the initial impact of the separation or divorce causes pain, suffering, fears and disruption for almost all children and teenagers involved (Bane, 1979; Berg & Kelly, 1979; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1976, 1978, 1979; Kelly & Berg, 1978; Kurkek & Siesky, 1979; Luepwitz, 1979; McDermott, 1968; Raschke & Raschke, 1979; Reinhard, 1977, Rutter, 1971). As a practicing clinical psychologist and family therapist, I regularly witness what the research documents for these children of divorced homes: these youngsters typically suffer depression over their loss, worry and anxiety over the marital disintegration, anger toward a parent for the resultant chaos and disruption, guilt over their real or imagined misbehavior thought to have contributed to the family break-up, loneliness and apprehensiveness over being seen as different from playmates, and a keen feeling of vulnerability to uncontrollable tragedy. The child's acute psychological distress and sense of family instability persists two or more years, with potential life-time consequences (see various studies by Wallerstein). Each year over the past decade, more than one million under 18 years of age have experienced their parent's divorce, with estimates that between 32% to 46% of children who have grown up in the United States during the 1970's will have experienced separation or divorce of their parents. These wide spread effects are not only psychological but economic, with over half of all single-parent families living below the poverty level.

Research Has Clearly Established the Characteristics of Fathers Who Promote Normal Child Adjustment

As the research strategies have become more sophisticated over time, the focus of studies on the father's impact on child development has shifted from comparisons of effects of fathers' absence versus fathers' presence to studies of the paternal characteristics which are associated with healthy adjustment.

Dr. Armand Nicholi, a psychiatrist on the faculty of Harvard University, has expressed the widely held conclusion among scholars of child development research, "If we know anything about normal human development, it rests heavily on a close, warm, sustained relationship with both parents. And if people with severe emotional non-organic disorders have anything in common, it's that they have experienced, sometime in their childhood, an absence of an accessible parent because of death, divorce or a time-demanding job.

"Some people say, 'Well, it's not the quantity of time, it's the quality.' They use that statement to rationalize their not spending enough time with their spouses and children, but time is like oxygen. There's a minimum amount that is needed to survive. Less than that amount may cause permanent damage. And I think the same holds true for a child's time and exposure to both parents" (Nicholi, 1985a).

A wealth of child development research indicates that a secure male identity and a normal psychological adjustment is fostered in boys by fathers in the home who are affectionate, nurturant, available, and

actively involved in child rearing (Mead & Rekers, 1979). Girls secure in their femininity tend to have fathers who encourage their feminine adjustment and contribute leadership in child rearing. Boys are much more likely to identify with their fathers if their interactions are rewarding and affectionate (Mussen and Distler, 1960). The father usually fulfills an instrumental role in the family in contrast to the expressive role of the mother. Lynn (1974) has contended that instrumentality is associated with preparing children for their roles in society and in two parent families, the instrumental role is typically the role taken by the father.

The research suggests a complex interaction between the father's dominance, paternal nurturance and his limit-setting which in combination promote normal child development and adjustment (Biller, 1976; Lamb, 1976).

The Family Strengths Research Parallels This Child Development Research of Fathering

A large number of quantitative and qualitative research studies on the characteristics of strong families have produced parallel results in recent decades. Some of these investigators are Otto, Whitaker, Hill, Lewis, Satir, Stinnet, Beavers, Gossett, Phillips, and Curran. An unpublished summary review of the research of these various investigators by Dr. Judson Swihart (at the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Kansas State University) found that the five characteristics of strong families found in common throughout all these investigators' research were the following: (1) good communication between family members, (2) appreciation expressed for one another in the family, (3) a spiritual/religious commitment, (4) adaptability and flexibility in the family, and (5) clarity of family rules.

Normal Child Adjustment Requires that These Fathering Characteristics Either Be Present in the Family or Provided by Active Substitution

There are factors which can mitigate the negative influence of a fatherless home. The presence of a father substitute has generally been found to counteract, to a certain extent, the effects of paternal deprivation (Matthews, 1976; Sutton-Smith, Rosenberg and Landy, 1968). For example, Santrock (1970) found that fathers' absence in black pre-school boys was significantly related to femininity, dependency and lack of normal aggression, as compared to father-present controls. However, the boys whose fathers were absent and who had a father substitute were significantly less dependent that the father-absent boys who had no father substitute.

Another factor which has been found to lessen the effects of paternal deprivation is a positive attitude towards the father and toward men in general on the part of the mother (Biller and Baum, 1971; Matthews, 1976).

Referring again to my analogy between family wellness and the physical wellness in the human body, we know that it is possible for a person who has lost a leg to move about in society with the help of crutches. With extra effort, the arms thereby partially compensate for the missing leg. In the same way, there are ways in which families are able to compensate for the absence of a father. The research, suggests that an active and costly substitution is occuring so that features of the missing father role are taken by other individuals such as an uncle, grandfather, older brother, or family friend. Furthermore, government welfare dollars are often spent as a substitute for the loss of income caused by the father's absence.

While there certainly are families without fathers who come through with "flying colors," this is done by compensating with real efforts, much like the person with a missing leg who perservers.

The fatherless families that "make it" are those who have preserved in heroic fashion in the face of the family's limitations and associated adversity, much like the way Helen Keller achieved so much without eyesight or hearing. To say that many children raised in a single-parent home can become well-adjusted, productive citizens is true because compensation is possible, but it does not tell the whole story. The same can be said of blind people--that they can live well-adjusted, productive lives. But both the blind person and the fatherless child have missed something very desirable and crucial that could have enriched their lives and made their adjustment much less difficult and costly.

Research clearly shows that the vast majority of adult and child citizens in America desire continuity and enduring commitment in father-child relationships, rather than having to suffer the loss of a nurturing and supportive father. In the face of pessimistic headlines that the family is an endangered species, research sets forth two important findings: (1) desire for fulfilling family life is as strong today as it was 50 years ago, and (2) effective family life does not just happen, it is the result of deliberate intention and practice.

George Gallup (1983) has repeatedly found in his polls that Americans hope and aspire for an intact, nuclear family. On the part of children, Wallerstein has reported the findings of her extensive research on divorce that children desire that their biological parents be reunited as long as five years after the divorce had taken place.

The Family and the National Agenda

It is, therefore, both compassionate and in society's vital interest to discover how to build and restore strength into America's families. Frankly, the absence of the father is increasingly posing one of the most common and tragic weaknesses of American families, placing increasing numbers of children at substantially greater risk in their development and well-being than other children living with continuity with both parents in a strong family.

Public Policy and Prevention

Our shared cultural values mandate compassionate help for hurting and needy families. But at the same time, an "ounce of prevention" is worth more than a pound of cure in serving families. A tremendous amount of child suffering and family distress could be prevented by a national agenda to restore social expectation and public policy that support the continuity of fathering in families.

As the 1980s dawned, there was beginning to be a rising appreciation for the fact that prevention is both more humane and more economical than remediation alone. Central in any thought of prevention is the place of the family. The family shapes the attitudes and practices of children and provides the basis of support and identity for adults.

Fresh, new national leadership is needed at exactly this point. For too long, American society has attended to the individual needs of the children of fatherless homes and the plight of the single parent to the neglect of the family system before its breakdown. The result has often been only a partial symptomatic relief, or a "band-aid" approach which neglected the root problems in the original family unit itself. Isolated categorical government programs--such as those for unwed, pregnant teenagers, runaway youth, school drop outs, juvenile delinquents, or childhood adjustment problems- as important as they are, simply have not typically met the total family need which generated the individual problem in the first place.

Restoring the Primary Parental Role

Coinciding with the 20th century phenomenon of governmentally-funded, professional services for child problems, there has been a parallel tendency for families to delegate more and more of its functions to outside institutions. For example, the health needs of a family might be inappropriately delegated entirely to the health care system and physicians, thereby neglecting the proper parental roles in preventative measures for health maintenance. While professional services can be effectively used by parents who maintain their own primary involvement and responsibility for their children's welfare, the attempts by many parents to massively delegate or abdicate parental responsibility to government, profession and community programs has not proven to be an effective substitute for family well-being and parental accessibility.

The parental role is central in encouraging youth and in providing for their needs for the largest portion of mainstream American families. For example, the parenting practices of many families promote a work orientation and successful job acquisition and employment retention by youth, and other families could benefit from the identification of those practices and the wide spread application of those practices. The needs of child and youth development and the goal of prevention of serious dysfunctions will be best served by reinforcing the value and centrality of the stable family unit and parental role. Marriage relationships and parenting roles can be strengthened to give children

and youth more confidence, self-respect and competence to succeed in today's world.

Applying Research Knowledge on Family Strengths

Many serious marital and child development problems could be prevented or corrected in early stages if families were better equipped to recognize family strengths and to build upon those strengths. Many needy marriages would benefit from learning about the successful and coping practices used by families with high levels of well being. There is a glaring need for more prevention strengthening of family life to offset the need for expanded governmental financial support for remedial social services for child victims of fatherless families.

Marriage enrichment and parent education curricula that promote the values and skills possessed by strong American families should be identified, developed, evaluated and disseminated to existing social support networks in local communities.

Research indicates that family connections with local support networks decreases need for use of a variety of governmental social services. Research has also established a high correlation between religious commitment and family commitment; this finding underscores the strategic importance of encouraging the work of religious institutions with family education and their involvement with natural helping networks for families (Rekers, 1985a). Volunteer resources can be activated by providing effective preventative educational materials for local programming to enhance marital satisfaction and parental competence, nurturance, and human problem-solving skills. Dissemination and widespread utilization of demonstration project findings on building family strengths could effectively facilitate private and local agency efforts to prevent family dysfunction and thereby promote more stable and adaptive child development.

National Leadership on Behalf of America's Families

The federal role needs to be reconceptualized to analyze family impact variables, to determine the impact of national policies, regulations, taxation and legislation upon families and to publicize how successful marriage and family life works. It is doubtful that the federal government can directly influence families to be strong in American society; the causation more likely runs in the opposite direction--i.e., strong families contribute to the strength of a nation. However, the leadership in federal government should be held accountable if they create a "desert" environment for families when they should be creating a "greenhouse" in which families can flourish.

Prevention is always more humane and more economical than remediation. My recent book, Family Building (Rekers, 1985a), includes contributed chapters by researchers, clinicians, community and national leaders which provide innovative, preventation approaches to enhancing and restoring strengths to the nation's families. I commend for your consideration these creative program ideas on promoting marital stability and parental competence, because American children develop

fewer debilitating problems when provided stable and nurturing relationships with their fathers. The recognition of the qualities demonstrated to be essential for family strength can guide the national agenda to attenuate the social and economic forces that contribute to the undesirable types of family diversity.

Identifying family strengths and focusing on how they can be transferred to families at risk for divorce would be a most significant undertaking with a far reaching potential benefits to children and to society, because divorce is a major cause of father absence in families and a major source of distress for American children. As Petersen (1985) astutely observed, "Our zeroing in on the positive qualities of family strength has great potential and can provide clear guidance as to where to give attention and to initiate action." I recommend that this strategy be attempted on a national level to strengthen America's families.

Promotion of education to equip families to recognize and cultivate their strengths can create a new vision in our communities -- a perspective that says that preparation for family life is part of our nation's plan of primary prevention. It is a basic part of education for citizenship and health.

It is my hope that America's leaders will sow some seeds of prevention that might strengthen family life in our generation that will reap a fruitful harvest of family stability, marital success and a nuturing environment for the future children of our nation and the world.

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